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From Scattered Buildings to Unified Campus: The Architectural Development of Boston University

The one thing everyone will tell you about Boston University is that it doesn't have a campus. When I first got here in September, I felt as if I was just walking through the city. Buildings weren't connected, and it was hard to tell where they started or ended. Compared to the University of Georgia, where everything was planned, and felt like I was entering a whole other world, but BU felt almost random. But the more time I spent on the BU campus, the more I realized there was more to the campus than just a bunch of random buildings. The campus itself tells a story of how it developed over time. Boston University didn't start as the unified campus we know today; it began as a collection of buildings spread across the city on Beacon Hill, downtown, and around Copley Square, and only later expanded west along Commonwealth Avenue.[1] Because of this, but it feels more layered, different buildings come from a different point in the university's history. These layers are still visible today, and instead of erasing what was there before, they built on top of it.

The question to ask is: what story is this fragmentation actually telling? Imagine if you were a student at Boston University in the late nineteenth century, your "campus" wouldn't look

[1] Kathleen Kilgore, Transformations: A History of Boston University (Boston: Boston University Press, 1991).

anything like it does today. You might start your day in Beacon Hill and walk downtown to Bromfield Street, and later head to Copley Square. There wasn't a central space, and there wasn't even really a campus. Boston University was founded in 1869, and the petition was signed in the home of one of their founders, Isaac Rich, along with two other founders, Lee Claflin and Jacob Sleeper .[2] In the beginning, it operated as what Nancy Salzman referred to as an "inner-city institution,"[3] in which the city itself acted as the university's campus. Rather than moving around a campus, students moved through Boston itself to attend classes. This early structure of the university shared the identity of the school. BU wasn't an isolated suburban campus like Tufts University, which was designed more like a college town; it also wasn't a typical urban campus like Northeastern, which still had a defined center and a more controlled layout. But was embedded within the urban fabric, there was no clear layout or entrance, which also made the campus feel fragmented.

One of the best ways to understand BU is through mapping. Instead of just directly comparing the maps, it makes more sense to follow the campus as it evolves. Looking at Figure 1, we can see how the initial campus had no center.

[2] "Boston University," Wikipedia, last modified May 6, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston_University.
[3] Nancy Lurie Salzman and Richard Cheek, Buildings and Builders: An Architectural History of Boston University (Boston: Boston University, 1985).

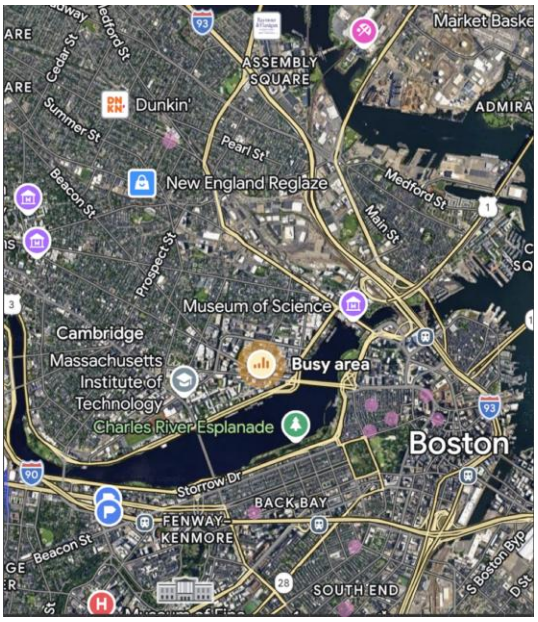


Figure 1. A map that indicated the early buildings of Boston University that were scattered across Boston. Pink dots indicate university buildings. Annotated by the author.

Source: Google Maps, accessed May 6, 2026.

The university existed as a series of disconnected points across the city. This wasn't just considered a limitation but part of the university's identity. The founder wanted to be Boston's university, and it was meant to be connected to the city, not separated from it.[4] But this also meant that there was no clear sense of spatial unity.

As Boston developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, BU expanded by adapting existing buildings rather than constructing new ones. Part of this was just a design choice or a part of their vision; it was due to financial limitations. One of the university's founders, Issac Rich, planned to leave a large portion of his estate to BU to help with its development. However, after he died in 1872, much of his property was lost in the great Boston fire of 1872.[5] Because of this, the university could not expand in Aspinwall in Brookline as

[4] Kilgore, Transformations.
[5] Boston University, "A Short History of BU's Biggest Campus Disruptions," BU Today, May 1, 2020, https://www.bu.edu/articles/2020/bu-history-biggest-campus-disruptions/.

planned.[6] Instead, they chose to expand gradually by purchasing and reusing existing buildings across the city. This was possible since many wealthy residents in neighborhoods such as Beacon Hill and Back Bay were moving in, which allowed BU to step in and take over former homes.

These moves were part of a much larger shift happening in Boston at the time. As the city became more populated and industrialized, wealthier families shifted to quieter suburban neighborhoods. Simultaneously, the back vacation started changing. As it developed commercially, it attracted different types of residents. Because of this, many large private homes were left behind, and Bu was able to acquire them and convert them into classrooms, dormitories, and offices. We can see this adaptive reuse especially along Bay State Road, where many of the brownstone houses were originally built as private residences in the late nineteenth century.[7] Over time, Bay State Roads was acquired, and the Browntownses were converted into student housing and administrative spaces that are still present today.

This pattern continued as they expanded west along Commonwealth Avenue. but acquired buildings that were commonly known as Boston's "automobile row,"[8] which consisted of auto showrooms, garages, and commercial spaces. Instead of demolishing these buildings, the university repurposed them. Since the buildings were reused, their architecture reflects their original purpose. The larger floor plates, large facades, and large windows were meant to display cars. Even today, we can still see these features, especially in buildings such as 855 Commonwealth Avenue, as seen in Figure 2.[9] This is where the idea of the campus being a

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[6] Kilgore, Transformations.
[7] Boston University, "What BU Was Like 100 Years Ago," Alumni & Friends, January 13, 2023, https://www.bu.edu/alumni/2023/01/13/blog-bu-100-years-ago/.
[8] Boston University, "A Trip Down Automobile Row: Commonwealth Avenue Was Boston's Original Auto Mile," BU Today, September 13, 2011, https://www.bu.edu/articles/2011/a-trip-down-automobile-row/.
[9] Boston University School of Law, "Where LAW Calls Home," The Record, 2022, https://www.bu.edu/law/record/articles/2022/where-bu-law-calls-home/.

palimpsest becomes visible. The university did not replace what was already there but instead built on top of it, and those earlier Mayer remain embedded as a part of the architecture.

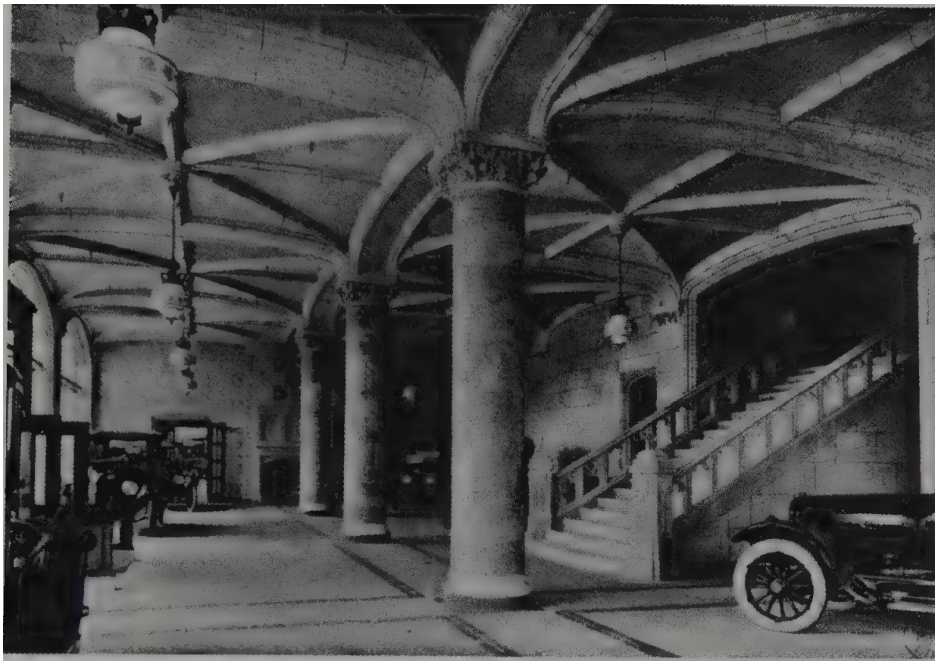


Figure 2. 855 Commonwealth Avenue, the present School for the Arts, was originally designed as showrooms for Buick automobiles. (From The American Architect and Building News, vol. XXI, no. 2357, 1921)

Source: Nancy Lurie Salzman and Richard Cheek, Buildings and Builders: An Architectural History of Boston University (Boston: Boston University, 1985).

By the twentieth century, Boston University began shifting west toward Commonwealth Avenue and the Charles River. It was a major turning point in the university's development. Instead of being scattered across the city, the buildings became more concentrated. Looking at Figure 3, this shift becomes more visible. The campus begins to take a more linear approach along Commonwealth Avenue rather than existing as disconnected points crossing in Boston.

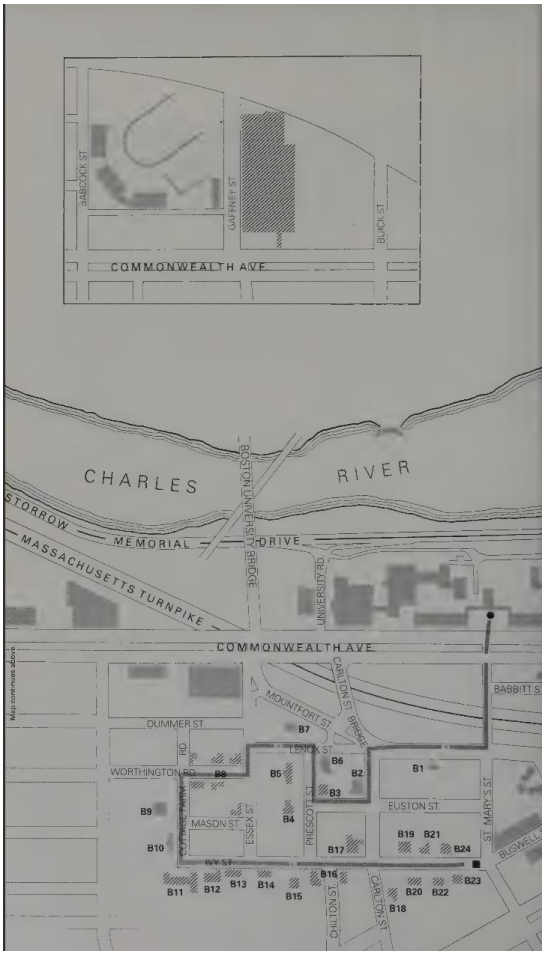


Figure 3. Boston University's expansion along the Charles River and Commonwealth Avenue

Source: Nancy Lurie Salzman and Richard Cheek, Buildings and Builders: An Architectural History of Boston University (Boston: Boston University, 1985).

This is the point where BU starts to resemble a campus. However, it did not function like a traditional one. In the 1920s, BU appointed architect Ralph Adams Cram to create a formal master plan.[10] Cram proposed a more unified layout with an organized academic building and included quadrangles, giving a stronger sense of spatial hierarchy similar to other established universities. However, this plan never fully came to realization, for various reasons, one main

[10] Kilgore, *Transformations*.

being financial imitations. This limitation has influenced BU's development since its founding. The university did not have the funds to completely build a campus from scratch. Other factors that impacted the development included the Great Depression, which also further limited construction. Because of all these various factors, the campus develops in a somewhat hybrid way. It became more organized but remained a bit irregular due to its previous expansion. Cram's vision is a representation of a moment where BU would have become a more traditional, planned campus. Instead, it continued to evolve gradually with many layers.

By the mid-twentieth century, Boston University made another attempt to organize its campus; this time, it took another approach. Instead of looking to traditional collegiate models like Cram, they turned to modernist architect Josep Lluís Sert in the 1960s.[11] Sert took a completely different approach. Rather than creating a closed, unified campus, his plan worked with the existing city. He reoriented the campus towards the Charles River and introduced structure and a greater sense of organization through vertical buildings, open courtyards, and pedestrian walkways.[12] We can see this shift reflected through the Mugar Memorial Library and the George Sherman Union. Instead of blending with the architecture of the old buildings, these buildings emphasized modern trials of visible structural elements and a different scale. This contrast is important. While Sert's plan created more organization, it did not erase earlier layers of the campus. Instead, it added another one. These modernist buildings exist alongside the residential and administrative brownstones and former commercial spaces. Thus, adding to the visibility of the different time periods existing on one campus. Sert's plan doesn't solve BU's

[11] Keith N. Morgan, "The Sert Campus, Boston University (Mugar Library, Law School and Library, and Sherman Student Union)," SAH Archipedia, https://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/MA-01-WB15.
[12] Morgan, "The Sert Campus, Boston University."

fragmentation; instead, it redefines it. Through his design, the campus becomes more structured while remaining open, linear, and connected to the city.

To gain a better understanding of how Boston University's campus was developed through adaptive reuse, we can look more in-depth at a specific example. 808 Commonwealth Avenue is a clear example of how the university converted existing structures to fit its needs rather than building entirely new buildings.

808 Commonwealth Avenue was originally contracted as a part of Boston's automobile row, so the building was designed for commercial use as a Cadillac showroom.[13] This is still visible in the overall structure of the building. The facade is wider and more open in comparison to a typical academic building. It also consists of large windows that were originally intended to display cars. As seen in Figure 4, these features mainly remain intact.



Figure 4. The College of Fine Arts (left) in 2011. In 1946, the building at 855 Commonwealth Avenue (right) was home to the Noyes Buick dealership. Photos by Robin Berghaus and courtesy of the Bostonian Society.

Source: Boston University, "A Trip Down Automobile Row: Commonwealth Avenue Was Boston's Original Auto Mile," BU Today, September 13, 2011, https://www.bu.edu/articles/2011/a-trip-down-automobile-row/.

[13] Boston University, "A Trip Down Automobile Row."

The scale of the windows and openness of the floor contrast with more traditional academic buildings, revealing its original function. Inside, the building has been adapted to meet the needs of the university and is now the Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground and 808 Gallery for the College of Fine Arts. Rather than being fully reconfigured, the space has been modified to accommodate the new use while retaining its underlying structure. This method of retention and alteration is what defines adaptive reuse at Boston University. 808 Commonwealth Avenue is no longer a showroom, but it's neither a traditional academic building with classrooms nor lecture halls. Instead, it exists somewhere in between, a building for academic use, used as a social and academic gathering space for students.

Even as Boston University became more concentrated along Commonwealth Avenue, its pattern for development remained mostly the same. It continued expanding outward rather than attempting to create a single enclosed campus. This was done by incorporating the surrounding area and is best seen in the West Campus, where it expanded along Commonwealth Avenue into Alston. While this part of campus may seem cohesive and institutional, physically, it is separated from the central campus. Reinforcing the idea that the campus is not really unified. We can see a similar pattern in the integration of Wheelock College. Wheelock College was founded in 1888 as an institution that focused on teacher education and child development, and it operated as an independent institution in the Fenway area for over a century until 2018, when Boston University officially acquired it, merging it into the BU system as the Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development.[14] Rather than constructing a new area, it absorbed a pre-existing institution. The college's layout and spatial organization were not originally part of Boston University, yet they became incorporated within the institution. After the merger,

[14] Boston University, "Wheelock College Merger," https://www.bu.edu/brown/wheelock-college-merger/.

Wheelock College had its own distinct identity, with smaller-scale academic buildings, green spaces, and a layout that felt more enclosed and community-oriented in comparison to BU's linear and urban structure. Although the institution's identity was absorbed by BU, many of the physical and spatial qualities of Wheelock College remained. The difference in spatial organization, architectural sense of separation from the Charles River, reflects its origins as an independent college. This creates a noticeable contrast between Wheelock and the rest of Boston University. Thus, reinforcing the idea. Boston University's campus is characterized by its various unique layers rather than a traditional unified campus.

Simultaneously. The orientation of the campus shifted over time. Earlier planning efforts, mainly those of Sert in the 1960s, emphasized the camp's relationship with the largest river.[15] This was done by creating open spaces and visual connections to the water. However, today the campus is defined strongly by Commonwealth Avenue, which functions as its primary axis of movement and organization. This continued expansion shows ever fully transitioned in traditional campus. Instead, it continues the university's history of adaptation, layering new developments onto existing structures and spaces.

In more recent years, Boston University has started to introduce buildings that reflect the school's contemporary approach to the campus's design. While earlier phases of development were largely shaped by adaptation, reuse, and gradual expansion, this newer phase of projects suggests an effort to create a stronger institutional identity through architecture. Similar to other higher academic institutions in the area, such as MIT and Harvard.

One of the strongest examples of this shift is the Duan Family Center for Computing Data Sciences. , which was completed in 2022. This vertical academic tower resembles a "jenga-

[15]Morgan, "The Sert Campus, Boston University."

like" structure due to its stacked and cantilevered design.[16] It stands out from the surrounding campus both in scale and form. Its height and distinctive profile make it a visible landmark along Commonwealth Avenue and the Boston skyline. This signals a shift in the university's intention toward a more deliberate and forward-looking campus.

A similar approach can be seen in the Rajen Kilanchand Center for Integrated Life Sciences and Engineering (CILSE), located on 610 Commonwealth Ave.[17] This building opened in 2017 and was designed to support interdisciplinary research, bringing together a variety of fields including biology, engineering, and computing.[18] Unlike most other buildings on campus that we adapted from residential or commercial use, CILSE was built specifically for academic and laboratory purposes. Its design places an emphasis on openness and collaboration with shared research spaces that encourage interdisciplinary collaboration.

Together, our projects such as the Center for Data Science and CILSE represent the shift of Boston University's spatial organization. Rather than adapting preexisting structures, the university increased its efforts towards purposeful buildings designed with an intention to integrate academics, research, and student life. Simultaneously, these buildings allow the university to contribute to the Boston skyline. Structures such as the CDS and student village rise above the surrounding low-rise campus fabric, making the university more visually prominent within the city and across the Charles River.[19] However, these buildings do not replace the existing latter that make up Boston University's campus. Instead, they add to it. Modern,

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[16] Boston University College of Arts & Sciences, "Take a Look Inside BU's Newest CDS Building," https://www.bu.edu/cas/take-a-look-inside-bus-newest-cds-building/.
[17] Boston University, "Center for Integrated Life Sciences & Engineering," Campus Planning & Operations, https://www.bu.edu/cpo/project/center-for-integrated-life-sciences-engineering/.
[18] Boston University, "New Kilachand Center Links Key Research Disciplines," *BU Today*, September 14, 2017, https://www.bu.edu/articles/2017/kilachand-center-for-integrated-life-sciences-and-engineering/.
[19] Boston University, "Boston University through the Years," *Alumni & Friends*, January 9, 2020, https://www.bu.edu/alumni/2020/01/09/boston-university-through-the-years/.

purpose-built structures that coexist with adaptive reused browns, commercial spaces, and car dealerships continue to tell the story of accumulation that has become the defining architectural identity of the university.

Because of Boston University's rich history of expansion and development, the layered nature of the campus is best understood through an immersive experience. Walking through campus, it doesn't have a feeling of entering a single, unified space. As you move through campus, the environment shifts. Near Warren towers, the campus feels more dense and centralized. The buildings are generally taller, and the scale is much larger. Overall, this area functions as a clear student hub. Walking for a few minutes, the feeling completely changes. Along the Bay State Road, the environment becomes more residential. The brownstones that line Bay State roads are smaller in scale, with narrower layouts and more enclosed interiors. Even though they function as dormitories and administrative offices, they still feel like houses rather than institutional buildings due to their facade. Moving back towards Commonwealth Avenue, the scale shifts once again. Buildings such as 808 Commonwealth Avenue feel more open and expansive with wider facades and large windows that reflect their original commercial use. Looking at the campuses as a whole, these transitions make it clear that Boston University is experienced at a single, cohesive place. Instead, it encountered a palimpsest, each layer shaped by a different moment in the history of development. As students walk from class to class, they move through the history of how it was built.

One of the best ways to understand something is through a comparison. In this case,e the best way to understand Boston University's campus is by comparing it to another more traditional campus, such as the one of the University of Georgia. Because UGA is located in Athens, Georgia, it is reflected in its layout and architecture. Unlike BU's urban campus, Athens

is a college town,n so Riga's campus is much more traditional and widespread. Since the city is named in reference to Athens, Greece, we see this reflected through its architecture where many academic and amdinstrative building are built in a Greek classical style. The campus is organized by recognizable landmarks such as Sanford Stadium, Tate Student Vet, UGA Bell, uga bell and Myers Quad. These pilots help center the campus and help navigate the campus while connecting the various parts of campus. In comparison, Boston University is organized linearly along Commonwealth Avenue. It's also physically defined in ways that separate it from the surrounding city, for example, the UGA Arch marks the transition between the university and downtown Athens. Thus, creating a clearer sense of boundary in comparison to Boston University, which has no comparable boundaries. Even the physical experience of walking through each campus reflects contrast. UGA's land grant hilly terrain and widespread yet maintained structured environment, while BU's relatively flat and linear organization results in a continuous and open experience. Rather than one campus being considered more ideal or perfect than the other, the differences reflect two very distinct models of campus design: one based on centralized planning and clear boundaries, while the other is shaped by expansion, adaptation, and integration into the city.

At first glance, Boston University may seem like a campus that lacks structure. Its buildings are disconnected, and their layout is fragmented. However, this is the result of how the university developed over time. From the beginning, the institution was scattered across the city, to its gradual concentration along Commonwealth Avenue. More recent developments, such as the Center for Computing and Data Sciences and the Rajen Kilachand Center for Integrated Life Sciences and Engineering, show how Boston University has consistently grown through a combination of adaptation and expansion. Each phase reflects a different phase of development

and the layers added rather than replacing what came before. Because of this, the campus can be best understood not as a single unified space but as a collection of different environments that are shaped by different moments in the institution's history. Residential browstones, former commercial buildings, and modern research buildings all exist side by side, creating a campus that reflects both the institution's continuity and change. Comparing it to the University of Georgia's campus, it makes this distinction even clearer. While the University of Georgia has a clearly defined campus that structures most of Athens, Boston University functions more as an extension of Boston itself, blending into the city rather than trying to stand apart.

Ultimately, Boston University does not lack a campus; it represents a different model of what a campus can look like. It functions as a palimpsest, where each layer of its development remains visible, tells a story, and continues to shape how the campus is experienced today.

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